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DNA hits solve cold cases, announces AG Cooper

SBI Lab pinpoints suspects for unsolved rapes investigated by Greensboro Police

Greensboro: New DNA analysis of unsolved rape cases has identified suspects in two unsolved cases in Greensboro and yielded leads in another case, Attorney General Roy Cooper and law enforcement officials announced Thursday.

"This technology together with good detective work can pinpoint criminals and solve cases, and most importantly, get dangerous repeat offenders off the streets," said Cooper. "These cases show that with the right tools we can make our communities safer."

The successes are part of Cooper's efforts with the State Bureau of Investigation to clear untested rape kits held by local law enforcement agencies across the state. The SBI's Forensic Biology requested several agencies, including the Greensboro Police Department, to submit some of their cold cases for DNA analysis.

"Simply put, the role of law enforcement is to catch criminals and protect our citizens," said Greensboro Chief of Police David A. Wray. "The advent of DNA technology and the state's DNA database has provided law enforcement with exceptional tools to do just that. Today, we recognize along with the Attorney General and the Director of the SBI, the results of this extraordinary technology here in our community."

In the first case solved as part of the project, SBI agents found a suspect's DNA in a rape kit taken from a Greensboro victim on November 1992. The agents ran the unknown suspect's DNA profile through a database of convicted offenders and discovered that it matched Jasper K. Summers (age 49), already in prison for armed robbery in Scotland Correctional Institute. Summers, who was also convicted of First Degree Rape in Guilford County in 1975, is serving a life sentence but could be eligible for parole.

Another DNA match solved a rape that occurred in November 2002. DNA evidence identified Ronald D. Miles (age 35 of 1505-B Elmer Street) as a suspect. Miles is in jail awaiting trial for a series of rapes in the Greensboro/Burlington area, which were also solved using DNA analysis. In addition, DNA evidence has generated leads in another unsolved case that is still under investigation.

Out of 44 cold cases submitted under the first phase of SBI efforts to clear untested rape kits, lab agents identified DNA in approximately half of the cases. That DNA is being compared with North Carolina's database of convicted offenders in hopes of solving more cases. The project is due to expand later this summer.

A recent report by the United States Department of Justice found that local law enforcement agencies nationwide have evidence from more than 540,000 unsolved crimes – including 52,000 homicides and 169,000 rapes – that has not undergone DNA or other testing that could help pinpoint suspects. The study also revealed 150 rapes,

murders and other crimes since 1993 that could have been prevented if states took DNA samples from burglars and other non-violent criminals before they begin to commit more serious crimes.

Cooper has long pushed to expand North Carolina's ability to use DNA evidence to convict the guilty and exonerate the innocent. He led the fight last year to make North Carolina the 29th state to include all felons in its convicted offender DNA database, giving detectives a greater field to search. He has also won more agents to test DNA evidence. In 2000, North Carolina had only 6 SBI agents qualified to analyze DNA, but thanks to internal transfers and General Assembly help the SBI has 21 new DNA experts. Cooper is asking the General Assembly for more agents to keep solving rapes, murders and other violent crimes.

Prior to the all-felon law taking effect there were approximately 41,000 samples in North Carolina's database of convicted offender DNA. Under the new law, the size of the database is expected to double within the first year, meaning that law enforcement and prosecutors will be able to use DNA evidence to solve even more cases and catch repeat offenders.

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Use DNA to convict criminals in North Carolina

Chewing gum, hair and even cigarette butts left at a crime scene can lead detectives to the right suspect thanks to DNA analysis. DNA, or deoxyribonucleic acid, is a unique genetic fingerprint found in every cell of the human body. Just a tiny trace of the criminal in saliva or blood left behind at a crime scene yields a DNA profile, which then can be compared to DNA samples from known criminals or other crime scene evidence for a match.

The value of DNA technology is perhaps most promising when it is used to solve crimes when there is no apparent suspect in the case. In a random rape case, for example, the victim may not be able to identify her attacker. When investigators examine evidence contained in a sexual assault kit collected from the victim, they are often able to collect a DNA sample from her attacker. This evidence can then be compared through the national DNA database, commonly called the CODIS system. If the comparison yields a match to an offender, the rapist can then be identified and brought to justice even though the victim never was able to identify her attacker.

Attorney General Roy Cooper has led a push to expand the DNA database and to examine sexual assault kits that have gone untested at police departments across the state. Since last December, North Carolina has added DNA samples from convicted felons, and just like fingerprints those DNA profiles are filed away into state and national databases of criminals. He has tripled the number of specialist agents at the SBI lab who can perform this analysis, and is asking the legislature for six more for next year.

Since criminals, and especially rapists, often strike again, a database "hit" can crack a cold case. The national DNA database has scored more than 4,500 hits since 1998 (*Criminal Justice Newsletter*, 2002).

However, we must do more. The National Commission on the Future of DNA Evidence says that more resources must go to law enforcement to use this technology quickly and effectively. Congress has debated helping states do more with science, but criminals who should be caught walk free. (*Using DNA to Solve Cold Cases*, US DOJ, July 2002).

In 1990, before North Carolina's DNA database was established, a series of brutal attacks on elderly victims shook Goldsboro. DNA analysis showed that the same person had committed all three crimes, but police had no suspects.

Ten years later, the SBI retested the evidence with new DNA technology and compared the DNA profiles with the database. In 2001, they matched a suspect whom police would likely never have found. The suspect's DNA was included in the state database because he had previously been convicted of a violent felony. When confronted, he confessed.

Just as DNA evidence can pinpoint a criminal, it can exonerate suspects who were accused using less reliable evidence, such as eyewitness testimony or co-defendant accusations. As the technology advances, the chances of convicting an innocent person, at least where identity can be proven through biological evidence, is greatly diminished.